CONTEMPORARY RELIGION IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE: THE CASE OF MODERN PAGANISM

A consideration of modern Paganism, one of the most important and dynamic complexes of religions to have appeared in the course of the twentieth century, goes further, to credit professional scholarship with the inspiration for the system of belief itself. It is possible to make a case that it is a classic invented tradition, in that much of the history on which it based its original claims has been shown to be wrong. On the other hand the history concerned was not invented by modern Pagans, but by mainstream and often distinguished scholars. They in turn based their suggestions on images generated by early modern demonologists, who were in turn influenced by popular traditions which derived partly from ancient paganism. The judgement of what precisely is old or new in the resulting mixture must therefore be to some extent a subjective one. What is more objectively clear is the value of an analysis of that mixture, for the investigation of two important areas of enquiry:
the relevance of religious history to the contemporary context of belief and the public value of research into contemporary religion. To these may be added three other allied and overlapping concerns: the integration of religious history and present-day religious practitioners; the relevance of historical research to contemporary debates on religion; and the intersection of research into contemporary religion and the current understanding and practice of religion.

As said, modern Paganism as a whole is something of a gift to an academic researcher, because it is also a gift of such researchers. All of its main divisions originally depended on ideas and suggestions provided by mainstream scholarship. These divisions are Pagan witchcraft, pagan Druidry, and shamanism.[1] There are certainly many other traditions

[1] For a useful overview of these traditions in a British context, see Graham Harvey, Listening People, Speaking

within the Pagan family, such as those that take specific inspiration from ancient Germanic, Celtic, Scandinavian, Baltic, Slavonic, Greek, Roman or Egyptian religion. These groups are culturally significant, and some have generated some noteworthy publications, but numerically they remain rather small and are marginal to the main Pagan movement. For present purposes, moreover, only witchcraft is truly relevant, as the concern here is specifically with the relationship between historical scholarship and Paganism. Shamanism depended not so much on history as on anthropology and religious studies. It was one of the dominant figures in comparative religion during the mid 20th century, Mircea Eliade, who first made the concept of shamanism fashionable throughout the Western world, as one of the most archaic forms of religious practice.[2] Similarly, it was a pair of American anthropologists, Carlos Castaneda and Michael Harner, who developed the techniques of native shamans in Latin America into a set which launched the urban shamanism of the late 20th century developed world. Castaneda's credentials as an anthropologist have been called into question, but there is no doubt that, whatever the quality of his fieldwork, his ideas were initially embodied in a University of California PhD thesis.[3]

Druidry misses the second part of the connection between historical research and Paganism. It was certainly based on mainstream scholarship. The whole glamour of the figure of the Druid for modern spirituality was derived from the domination of scholarly portraits of ancient British religion by Druids between the mid 18th and the late 19th centuries. This meant that anybody developing a spiritual tradition which harked back to ancient Britain was going to

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Earth: Contemporary Paganism (London: Hurst, 1997)

[2] Mircea Eliade, Shamanism (English edition, London: Routledge, 1964)

[3] Carlos Castaneda, The Teachings of Don Juan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968); Michael Harner, The Way of the Shaman (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980).

take the Druids as central figures. Around 1790, fifty years after the supremacy of Druids was established in the national imagination of the ancient past, the Welsh stonemason Edward Williams began to forge texts which provided the Druidic teachings and liturgy missing from actual historical records. Williams, better known by his Bardic name of Iolo Morganwg, was a figure as securely rooted in conventional scholarship, and later as controversial, as Carlos Castaneda. What removes him and his successors from my concerns today is that they did not regard themselves essentially as pagans. Rather, they set out to rediscover a primeval religion of which the great historic faiths, including the Christian, had been separate manifestations, and which was entirely compatible with Christianity. When modern Druidry became self-consciously Pagan, in the 1980s and 1990s, it had to remodel itself not on a template derived from 19th and 20th century Druids, but from modern Pagan witchcraft.[4]

It is that witchcraft, of which the British-founded tradition of Wicca is the oldest and best-known form, which is the true concern here. It fits the remit of this article exactly, being at once very clearly a cluster of religions, explicitly Pagan, and based firmly on the teachings of orthodox and mainstream historical scholarship. The scholarship concerned had long and distinguished roots, which ran back into the 18th century, and the great movement that called itself the Enlightenment. One of the features of that movement was that the people who controlled power in European society – the political and social elite – ceased to believe in the reality of magic. This automatically meant that they could not believe in witchcraft either. They therefore had to remove all the traditional laws that enabled the prosecution of suspected witches. This involved the apparent admission that all the trials for alleged witchcraft which

[4] Ronald Hutton, The Druids (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2007); and Blood and Mistletoe: The History of the Druids in Britain (London: Yale University Press, 2009).

had occurred in the past, and peaked in the previous two hundred years, had been a terrible mistake. Somebody had to be held responsible, and the reformers blamed two very different groups of people. One consisted of established Churches, who to the 18th-century rationalists typified all that had been most ignorant and bigoted about previous European society. The other consisted of the common people, whom the Enlightenment philosophers viewed as a sink of superstition and prejudice, in need of re-education. The programme of these philosophers, especially Voltaire and the authors of the Encyclopedié, was therefore to break the power of the churches and set about the improvement of the masses.[5]

Both reforms occurred, but in the process European liberals changed their minds about a couple of things. The heroes of the 18th-century reformers had been monarchs, who, once re-educated, could use their absolute authority to change things for everybody. The radicals of the 19th century were democrats. To them, traditional monarchy, like the traditional churches, had to lose its powers to make way for democracy. This meant that the common people could no longer be held responsible for the old witch-hunts, even though in actuality they had produced virtually all of the accusations. Instead, it was necessary to blame both traditional churches and traditional rulers and aristocracies. The witch trials could be made into a conspiracy by those, to brainwash the people for their own ends. Here the supporters of the old regimes actually played into the hands of the radicals. During the 1820s and 1830s two German conservatives, Karl Ernst Jarcke and Franz Josef Mone, suggested that the victims of the witch hunts had actually been pagans.[6] This was their way of getting round the challenge

[5] Roy Porter, 'Witchcraft and Magic in Enlightenment, Romantic and Liberal Thought', in Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra et al., Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries (London: Athlone, 1999), pp. 191-282.

[6] Karl Ernst Jarcke, 'Ein Hexenprozess', Annalen der Deutschen und Auslandischen Criminal-Rechts-Pflege,

of the Enlightenment: they argued that witchcraft itself did not exist, but the witches still deserved to have been hunted because they were the surviving practitioners of a bloodthirsty and disgusting ancient religion. It was a clever tactic, but had a fundamental flaw. To answer it, all that 19th-century liberals, such as the Frenchman Jules Michelet, had to do was to reverse the sympathies. They declared that the people persecuted as witches had indeed practised an ancient religion: but that it had been a thoroughly good one. It had loved nature, encouraged human beings to express and enjoy themselves freely, and been rooted in the common people. It had honoured women as strong and wise beings and embodied much traditional wisdom, especially with regard to natural healing. It was, in fact, everything that the medieval Christian Church and state were not, and therefore they had to destroy in order to fix their power over the masses.[7]

In its essence, therefore, the idea that witchcraft had been a libertarian pagan religion was complete by the middle of the 19th century, a product of German and French intellectuals. It was then taken up by many authors in the English-speaking world, of whom the last and most celebrated, in the 1920s and 1930s was the distinguished Egyptologist Margaret Murray.[8] What she contributed to this version of history was a new wealth of detail, taken from early modern texts, which seemed to fill out a picture of the religion concerned. Her arguments could not readily be tested, because of a lack of systematic research into the early modern witch trials, based on original sources. In default of that, it was widely accepted. Between 1945

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1 (1828), p. 450; Franz Josef Mone, 'Uber das Hexenwesen', Anzeiger fur Kunde der Teutschen Vorzeit (1839), pp. 271-5, 444-5.

[7] See especially Jules Michelet, La Sorcière (Paris, 1862).

[8] For this process, and for Murray's work, see Ronald Hutton, The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 132-50, 194-201.

and 1970 it was treated as fact by a range of eminent British historians of the medieval and early modern periods, including Sir George Clark, Sir Stephen Runciman and Christopher Hill.[9] It was effectively the national historical orthodoxy of the age and built into its textbooks. Really, however, Murray and her compatriots had only added apparent detail to the German and French construction. Only two truly significant contributions were made to that in the course of the twentieth century, one in Britain and one in America.[10] The British contribution was the claim, made by Gerald Gardner and his associates in the 1950s, that the witch religion imagined in the liberal polemics had survived in secret to the present time. Gardner published a set of teachings and rites, and he and his companions initiated recruits into more, which provided the basis for a theoretical revival of the religion. The American, Charles Godfrey Leland, had asserted that the witch religion had persisted into recent times among Italian peasants. He published some of its alleged liturgy. He did not, however, either state positively that it was still being practised or attempt to practise it himself. Gardner did both, with considerable success, and the result was Wicca, which spread across the Western world during the following three decades. It provided, as said, the model for modern Paganism in general, in terms of deities, attitudes and the basic form of rites. The major American addition to the concept of the witch religion was already under way in the 1890s but really took off in the 1970s. This was a specifically radical feminist reworking of the construct, to

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[9] G. N. Clark, The Seventeenth Century (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1945); Christopher Hill, From Reformation to Industrial Revolution (London: Weidenfeld, 1967); Stephen Runciman, 'Preface', to paperback edition of Margaret Murray, The Witch-Cult in Western Europe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964).

[10] For which see Hutton, Triumph of the Moon, 141-8, 205-52, 340-68.

assert that the witch hunts were a way of suppressing women. In this reading the old enemies, the Christian churches and states, were still primarily to blame, but men in general had become their lackeys and collaborators.

These two additions to the basic story came together on an international scale in the 1980s. There can be little doubt that they did a lot of people a great deal of good, in giving them a version of history that enabled them to break free from traditional religious, moral and gender stereotypes. It scored in particular on three major points. First, in any of its versions it was feminist. It remains a simple truth that the witch is one of the very few images of independent female power that traditional European culture has bequeathed to the present. In ancient Greek, Roman, Germanic and Celtic religion, public rites were carried on mainly by men, as heads of political and social units. They could be supported by male religious specialists, as priests, seers or Druids. Likewise, men could work magic, but by learning it, from books or teachers. By contrast, women seem to have been regarded as natural repositories of magical power and knowledge, less regulated, more spontaneous and more dangerous. That is why all the cultures named above resorted to them as oracles and prophetesses, when normal religious systems proved inadequate. As part of this, it seems to have been supposed that women could also dispose of destructive magical power far more easily and naturally than men: hence the female stereotype of the witch across most of Europe, where this gendered belief system obtained. It may therefore be seen that the identification of witchcraft with female power runs very deep.[11]

The second way in which pagan witchcraft made a strong appeal to the modern counter-

[11] This is an argument which will be made, with full source references, in forthcoming work by the present author.

cultural sensibility was by associating witches with the natural world. This was also an old linkage, and to my mind largely functional. Witches were supposed to understand nature because they used natural substances in their craft. More simply, however, because their meetings, revels and rites were secret occasions, they had to be held well away from populous places, in meadows, woods or mountains. This association of witchcraft with the wild and green stood them in good stead in a modern age which commenced with the Romantic cult of nature and has gone on to reckon with a full-scale ecological crisis. A third very potent aspect of the modern dream of pagan witchcraft was that it embodied a libertarian ethic of joyous self-expression. Again, this was based on early modern images. Early modern people officially believed that witches were enslaved by Satan, and found his promises of reward ultimately hollow. In artistic depictions of their activities, however, and sometimes in the fantasies projected by early modern people confessing to witchcraft, they seem by contrast to be having a wonderful time. They were made into key traditional images of misrule, disorder and freedom from moral constraint, and, whatever the grim implications of their activities, as workers of destruction, were clearly portrayed as hugely enjoying themselves. This element of abandoned revelry, and full-blooded taking of pleasure, easily turned the witch into modern icon of liberation in the positive sense. It enabled modern witchcraft to function as a religion which celebrated the joys of living, and above all of sexual union, as things sacred in themselves. By a reversal of sympathies, images constructed by the imaginations of early modern witch-hunters, of a demonic and terrifying religion, became a means in investing fleshly pleasures with genuine sanctity.

It helped in all this that modern pagan witchcraft is a counter-cultural tradition by a double descent. It derives directly and genuinely from the Western world's oldest and most continuous

clandestine intellectual tradition. While its rites certainly drew on images of witchcraft, they were much more heavily dependent on the Western tradition of ritual magic.[12] This actually is what Gerald Gardner claimed Wicca to be: a body of texts and practices handed down by training and initiation all the way from the ancient world. It can be traced directly back through the Christian magical tradition of the Middle Ages and after to the Arabic literature of the early Middle Ages, and so to ancient Egypt. Ancient Europeans had generally believed that it was inherently wrong for humans to attempt to gain direct control over supernatural powers for their own ends, both because this threatened society and because it usurped the authority of deities. Ancient Egyptians, by contrast, thought that it was perfectly in order for humans to do just this. As a result, before the end of the ancient world, Greek-speaking Egyptians had developed a body of texts which purported to instruct magicians in techniques designed to achieve a range of desires, including union with the divine. They are the closest counterpart to modern pagan witchcraft in the ancient world. They did not descend the centuries as a separate religion, but were combined with whatever the dominant faith of the time happened to be. None the less, they provided Wicca with a body of rites which could easily be recombined with paganism and had a direct and unbroken lineage from antiquity. It was just not the one that the first publicists of Wicca claimed. The tradition of ceremonial magic represents a very convenient spiritual vehicle for modern humans who have lost the traditional fear of the divine and of an associated, menacing and capricious, natural world. It allows them a relationship with deities based more on affection, alliance and negotiation: which is very much that of

[12] For the argument that follows, see Ronald Hutton, The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 337; and Witches, Druids and King Arthur: Studies in Paganism, Myth and Magic (London: Hambledon and London, 2003), pp. 87-192.

modern Paganism. It is interesting to speculate that Paganism may indeed have recognised and claimed such an inheritance, had it not been for the apparent scholarly orthodoxy, at the time when it developed, that witchcraft had been a pagan religion. That diversion of perception was reinforced by the fact that Gerald Gardner was closely acquainted with Margaret Murray.

The 19th-century re-imagining of what witchcraft should have been, as a joyous pagan religion, thus formed in many respects a good model for a radical modern one. It hit, however, the problem that the 19th-century construct was decisively rejected by historians from 1970 onward.[13] This was the result of a new and sustained burst of research into the original records of the witch trials. Hitherto such widespread and careful professional investigation had been lacking, largely because scholars, filled with the Enlightenment contempt for magic and witchcraft, had shied away from studying it. Their new willingness to do so was as much a sign of changing times and attitudes as the appearance of Wicca and radical feminism. The new data challenged the 19th-century construct at every point, but in three major respects in particular. First, it showed that witch-hunting was not a specifically Christian tradition. It had been carried on by all of the peoples of ancient Europe and the Near East, and some had done so in enormous quantity: the pagan Romans had achieved rates of execution which surpassed any in the early modern trials.[14] Second, the new research proved that witch-hunting could not be equated directly with the suppression of women. Europe had included

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[13] A story told in detail in Hutton, Triumph of the Moon, pp. 377-81.

[14] Daniel Ogden, Night's Black Agents (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2008; Wolfgang Behringer, Witches and Witch-Hunts (Cambridge: Polity, 2004); Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark (ed.), Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Ancient Greece and Rome (London: Athlone, 1999); Matthew W. Dickie, Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World (London: Routledge, 2001).

areas – such as Iceland, Finland, Normandy, Carinthia, the Baltic lands and Russia in which the overwhelming majority of victims were male. Even in most countries, where women predominated, men could still form a significant minority: in Switzerland, 40%.[15] The third great feature of the new research was that it showed that the figure whom the English have called the witch – somebody who works magic to harm others – has been found in every inhabited continent of the world. Extra-European peoples were as capable of staging savage witch-hunts as Europeans.[16] This factor is currently of pressing importance as murders of suspected witches, and the revival of laws against witchcraft, are spreading rapidly in the developing world.[17] Europe was, however, unique in two respects. One was that the Christian propensity to dualism, to see the world in terms of a battle between total good and total evil,

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[15] Kirsten Hastrup, 'Iceland', Antero Heikkinen and Timo Kervinen, 'Finland', and Maria Mader, 'Estonia 1', in Bengt Ankarloo and Gustav Henningsen (ed.), Early Modern Witchcraft (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 257-72, 319-38, 383-402; William Monter, 'Toads and Eucharists: The Male Witches of Normandy', French Historical Studies, 20 (1997), pp. 563-95; Rolf Schulte, Man as Witch (Basingstoke; Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Alison Rowlands (ed.), Witchcraft and Masculinities in Early Modern Europe (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

[16] Behringer, Witches and Witch-Hunts; Ronald Hutton, 'The Global Context of the Scottish Witch-Hunt', in Julian Goodare (ed.), The Scottish Witch-Hunt in Context (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), pp. 16-32; and 'Anthropological and Historical Approaches to Witchcraft', Historical Journal, 47 (2004), pp. 413-34.

[17] Behringer, Witches and Witch-Hunts, pp. 196-228; Hutton, 'The Global Context of the Scottish Witch-Hunt', p. 32; and 'Anthropological and Historical Approaches to Witchcraft', pp. 416-17; John Hund (ed.), Witchcraft Violence and the Law in South Africa (Pretoria: Protea Book House, 2003).

caused it to be the only place in which witchcraft was redefined as a religion, devoted to Satan. The other is that Europeans became the only peoples to have turned spontaneously from a strong belief in witchcraft to a strong disbelief in one, at least officially.

For all these reasons, the 19th-century myth of what witchcraft should have been is now revealed as so wrong that, in the context of the modern world, it is positively dangerous. The new historical orthodoxy finds no case of paganism lingering as a self-conscious, active and rival religion, in any part of medieval Europe that had been converted to Christianity. For that reason, it firmly rejects the idea that the people accused of witchcraft were pagans. On the other hand, it equally emphatically continues to find meaningful the notion of pagan survivals within medieval and later Christian culture.[18] Christian culture took over a great many physical and mental trappings from ancient paganism. Some of these, like forms of architecture and ritual, it assimilated completely. Others, like motifs in art and literature, it accepted with more or less ease as mythology and allegory. With still others, such as a belief in a fairy world, it lived in uneasy co-existence, while yet more, notably ritual magic, were persecuted but survived. This meant that such traces of the ancient pagan world remained available for modern Europeans to filter them back out of the Christian mix and recombine them with an active worship of ancient deities, to create modern Paganism. Likewise, in the particular case of the history of witchcraft, it remains important that pagan folklore and mythology survived into Christian times to inform the stereotype of what a satanic witch should look like. It is true that a recognition of this has been much more pronounced among Continental European scholars, such as Carlo Ginzburg, Eva Pocs and Wolfgang

[18] What follows in the next two paragraphs is a summary of the argument made with full source references in Ronald Hutton, Pagan Britain, forthcoming from Yale University Press, chapter 7.

Behringer, than among their English-speaking counterparts. This has been largely just because evidence for such ancient components in early modern witchcraft beliefs are more plentiful on the Continent. However, it may also be because of the great influence of the 19th-century myth of witchcraft in the English-speaking world in recent times, producing a proportionate reaction of disinclination to look for any traces of paganism in the image of the witch.

None the less, every professional historian in the world now seems to have rejected the belief that paganism survived into the Christian centuries as an active resistance movement. Likewise, they all seem to have adopted, to differing degrees, the idea that pagan ideas and images survived as part of Christian culture, some mainstream and some counter-cultural. The implications of this change for modern Pagan self-images are profound. The old one induced a deep suspicion of mainstream society and a particularly adversarial attitude towards Christianity. It fostered a sense of Paganism as a beleaguered band of true believers, the constancy and faith of whom had maintained it until it was able to proclaim itself anew in modern times. It thereby encouraged a heavy emphasis on initiatory lineage, as the mechanism which had maintained the religion in secret. This in turn reinforced the authority of both received tradition and of the leaders of its groups, who could hand on the line of initiation and the teachings that defined the tradition. The revisionist history invites a greater sense of integration into, and a common inheritance with, the parent society, Instead of a line of martyrs and embattled tradition-bearers, the immediate ancestors of Paganism become a succession of radical intellectuals from the late 18th century onward. These carried out the work of distinguishing Pagan elements in Western culture and recombining them with images and ideas retrieved directly from the ancient world. They may be regarded with pride, in

including some of the most celebrated artists and authors in modern Western civilisation. In this model, Paganism is not something inherently different from mainstream society, traditionally oppressed and persecuted by it, but represents a distillation of some of that society's deepest and most important modern impulses. The new model reduces the emphasis on the authority of leaders and elders, and on initiatory lineages, and encourages a greater liberalism and eclecticism within the movement. It also reduces bitterness towards other forms of faith, especially Christianity, and encourages co-operation with their practitioners because of a shared cultural inheritance with the ancient world.

In this context it may be pertinent for me to speak more directly about my own experiences of writing Pagan history, with reference to this context. When a national British Pagan movement gained momentum in the years around 1990, and supplied gatherings at which I could meet its members en masse, I found that the traditional history was already regarded by many as unsound. Enough knowledge of the change in opinion by professionals had come through to alert many British Pagans to the problem. In particular, and highly significantly, it had become accepted by the most respected and nationally active of them, and those who were longest-established as leaders and had done most to foster and defend British Paganism. Conversely, those few who resisted the change tended to fall into three other groups: residents of the literal or metaphorical backwoods; leaders of recently appeared traditions who were trying to assert their claims against the more long-lived and important; and recent arrivals in Britain, attempting to establish their reputations on the scene. None of them endured. My own contribution, invited and supported by the leaders of British Paganism, was to attempt to establish a genuine, and provable, history of pagan witchcraft. I carried out this work in a series of publications between 1996 and 2003, very much within the revisionist framework

discussed above.[19] In the course of it I had no serious problems with Pagans, whom I found both helpful and often personally charming and interesting. I had many, however, with my parent society, which very swiftly reminded me that this was not regarded entirely as a legitimate field for research.

I shall provide just two examples of the resulting experiences, among a potentially large number. The first occurred in 1994, when I addressed a national Pagan conference on a purely historical subject. I did not know that among the audience was an Anglican evangelist, gathering material under cover in order to combat Paganism. I learned of this fact when he informed a convention of clergy of the dangers that Paganism represented, and cited my presence at the conference as an example of the kind of influential figure whom this dangerous religion was now attracting. His words were reported in a major national newspaper, the "Daily Telegraph", whereupon my Head of Department summoned me and told me that he was uneasy about the direction of my research. I held firm to the argument that the research concerned was both valid and important, and he did not press the matter. The other incident occurred four years later, when my university's student newspaper asked me for an interview concerning my research, with the explanation that it wanted to make this the first of a series on professors in the university who were carrying out interesting research . I provided one, and then found my face splashed over the front of the paper with the headline: 'Warning: This Man Could Be A Witch'. The article which followed questioned my motives in showing interest in a religion which could only be at best disreputable, and at worst satanic and criminal. It was the

[19] Ronald Hutton, 'The Roots of Modern Paganism', in Charlotte Hardman and Graham Harvey (ed.), Paganism Today (London: Thorsons, 1996), pp. 3-15; The Triumph of the Moon; 'Modern Pagan Witchcraft' in Willem de Blecourt, Ronald Hutton and Jean La Fontaine (ed.), Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Twentieth Century (London: Athlone, 1999), pp. 1-80; Witches, Druids and King Arthur, pp. 87-192, 259-94.

result of a coalition between ambitious would-be journalists anxious to have a sensational article to show prospective employers on the staff of scandal-raking newspapers, and fundamentalist Christians on the paper's staff.

Since the publication of my main book on the history of modern pagan witchcraft, when it became clear to all what my research was actually about, I have had no more such trouble, but my students are not so fortunate. In the preface to that book, I warned ambitious young historians to avoid the subject until they had secured jobs.[20] Some, inevitably, ignored me, and were inspired to work on it and related topics. One was a young man seeking to research into the posthumous influence of the early twentieth-century ritual magician Aleister Crowley on British occultism. He applied to the Arts and Humanities Research Council for a studentship, for which he was well qualified, and I subsequently received a telephone call from an academic sitting on the panel which received it. She warned me that, having read his application, she felt that he had the classic profile of somebody suffering mental illness, and that I might be in physical danger from him. I took this seriously, wondering what she had spotted that I had not, until it became obvious that her sole grounds for her diagnosis lay in his chosen subject matter. She felt that anybody interested in the influence of Crowley had by definition to be disturbed. When I assured her that this was not necessarily the case, she snapped at me that she had warned me, and rang off. I was not surprised, subsequently, either when he failed to receive a studentship or when he went on to finance himself through a perfectly successful thesis, which became a book.

At least now my own established reputation as an authority in the field has enabled me to act against some of this injustice. When a Pagan is accused of a serious crime – which is

[20] Hutton, Triumph of the Moon, p. xii.

happily rare – her or his books and ritual equipment are routinely presented in court as evidence of bad character. It is now as routine a matter that I get brought in by the defence to explain that there is nothing inherently evil or antisocial in Paganism, and so allow a fair trial to proceed. I have likewise, over the past sixteen years, given expert advice to the police, caring services and educational authorities with regard to the nature of Paganism: in some cases people have recovered jobs as a result. This is a very clear case of the practical applicability of academic research: what is currently known in British national research assessment exercises as Impact. The quid quo pro for it, however, is that my own religious beliefs have to remain a private matter. It is still not generally acceptable in this field for somebody to be an effective official expert who is also a public practitioner. This matters also because the number of people who have any profound personal knowledge of Paganism, and hold tenured posts in British universities, those of the nation which has been the principal birthplace of modern Paganism, is very small. Hardly any hold professorial chairs, or wield any widespread influence in the academic system. This situation has remained constant over the past fifteen years, despite the growth of both the numbers and the public visibility of Paganism in Britain as a whole. Indeed, across the Western world, the biggest single weakness of Paganism remains its lack of genuinely prominent and influential members in any occupation.

For the purposes of this article, however, it is necessary to return to the relationships between Paganism and historical research, and between Paganism and professional scholarship. The analysis of these can conclude by examining them in an international setting. As said, British Pagans in general accepted the revisionist model of their history without much commotion or division. Adherents to British Paganism on the European mainland have done so as well, because of their very strong personal links with Britain. Resistance to the new

historical model had been concentrated in English-speaking nations overseas, above all in the United States – which has become the heartland of what some have called Pagan fundamentalism – but also in New Zealand, Australia and Canada.[21] It is possible that this pattern matches one encountered in religious history as a whole: that religious traditions exported to colonies often tend to develop into more extreme and literalist forms there. Such a pattern would certainly match what has happened to Paganism, but as an explanation for the global distribution of Pagan hostility to revisions in the accepted foundation myth of pagan witchcraft, it needs some qualifications. One is that such attitudes are not characteristic of Pagans as a whole in the nations concerned. In America, counter-revisionism is concentrated strongly in the central and western parts of the country, and is particularly weak in New York and New England. Even where it manifests, it exists alongside Pagans who happily embrace a revised version of their history. Indeed, the leaders of counter-revisionism are nowhere the accepted leaders of Paganism itself, the people who have founded and guided particular traditions, written the books that have inspired readers to become Pagans, and defended their religion to society as a whole. They are invariably newcomers to the Pagan scene, striving to establish their reputations in it by acting as champions of the religion within which they have just appeared. Most, indeed, only seem to have a presence on the Internet, not leading actual groups and rarely or never appearing at gatherings.

Furthermore, a much simpler pair of reasons may be proposed for concentration of an adverse reaction to historical revisionism among Pagans in those particular nations. One is their sheer size and regional disparity, which is likely to produce diverse attitudes. The other, which is probably more important, is that Paganism arrived there from Britain, and so later

[21] It has been expressed mostly on the Internet, in a succession of usually ephemeral blogs and web sites.

than it appeared in Britain. Among British Pagans, the traditional model of their history had collapsed, and then a revisionist successor was developed to fill the gap. In other words, revisionism came as a positive force, to supply a new history after the old was already gone. In the former British colonies overseas, people who had recently been converted to Paganism according to a completely literal belief in its traditional history more often encountered revisionism as an apparent all-out attack on their new religion. They had no knowledge of the circumstances in which it had appeared, or the need for it, and therefore their responses were much more likely to be those of confusion and resentment. What all this has served to demonstrate, or at least to argue, is that the relationship of modern Paganism with professional historical research is both close and complex. It is also still rapidly developing. It is currently possible that distinct, self-consciously reactionary and fundamentalist, strains of Paganism will establish themselves in America and other English-speaking lands overseas. These in turn may win converts in the British homeland. On the other hand, it is equally possible that all parts of the Pagan world will slowly accept the revisionist model of Pagan history, in varying forms and with different emphases, much as the British have done.

What is now certain is how important it is for Pagans genuinely to appreciate what is happening, and has happened, in the world of professional historical research. It is indeed possible to go further, in conclusion, and suggest that to professional scholars Paganism represents a wonderful example of creatively applied history, and indeed of applied academic publications. It is a very pleasant task, in this first issue of this much-needed journal, to be able to emphasise to professional colleagues how much their work matters, not just in the analysis and understanding of religion, but in the creation of it.